



Review: [Untitled]

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Kiss of the Spider Woman by Hector Babenco; David Weisman
Mauricio Viano

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ciated *American Films Since the Beginning of Cinema* (Brussels: Royal Film Archives of Belgium, 1978). This jump in popularity preceded *Vertigo*'s re-release in 1983.

3. Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 4.

4. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hore and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 11.

5. Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Ballentine, 1983). The making of *Vertigo* is discussed on pp. 425-35.

6. See Bob Thomas, *King Cohn: The Life and Times of Harry Cohn* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), pp. 325-31.

7. Christine Gledhill, "Developments in Feminist Film Criticism," *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Baltimore, MD: University Publications of America, 1984), pp. 18-48.

8. François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 227.

9. Michael Rogin, "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies," *Representations*, no. 6 (Spring 1984): 1-36.

Reviews

KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN

Director: Hector Babenco. Producer: David Weisman. Script: Leonard Schrader, from the novel by Manuel Puig. Photography: Radolfo Sanchez. Music: John Neschling. Distribution: Island Alive.

Hector Babenco's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is perhaps the most brilliant proof that Brazilian cinema is coming of age.¹ After nationalizing the film industry's main sectors, the state has made domestic production competitive against "Hollywood imperialism" by various means—subsidies and promotional services, coproduction arrangements and quotas requiring theaters to screen a certain number of domestic films per year. A substantial relaxation in censorship has widened the "legal space" of film production, enabling directors to keep pace with the social and cultural transformations Brazil is facing.² Concurrently, a generation of film-makers has emerged which retains Cinema Novo's political interests while eschewing its didacticism and experimentalism. Directors such as Babenco, Reichenbach, Jabor and Yamazaki have attained international reputations and, more importantly, have paved the road to socially committed film-making capable of addressing large audiences. The "popular-commercial" format of their films (including the use of soap opera stars) and their freewheeling attitude towards "cinematic pleasure" (abundant use of sex and humor) could not but evoke sharp criticism from the orthodox left; as a result, says Mark Osiel, "the directors now exist in tension not only with the state (and its censorship), but also with some sectors of the radical intelligentsia (and hence with their own past)".³

It is no exaggeration to say that with his last film Babenco has perfected the competitive-

ness of Brazilian cinematography while providing a lesson to the left. Unlike *Pixote* (1981), his impressive but not too popular story of homeless youth, largely played by nonprofessionals, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* utilizes famous stars and therefore takes a significant step towards commercial success. William Hurt and Sonia Braga are so well known to the American public that it is easy to foresee wide distribution of this film, especially in view of Hurt's prize at Cannes. In addition, the film's potential of winning an international market is considerably increased by its being a cinematic adaptation of a famous Argentine novel by Manuel Puig.⁴ Within this palatable framework, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* engages with a number of blatantly political questions from a leftist point of view. As I shall argue, it is in fact a film about and for the left.

Unlike many political films, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is not interested in the depiction of the enemy without—the repressive "system" that imprisons and tortures the two protagonists; that enemy is, so to speak, taken for granted. What is under scrutiny, rather, is the enemy within, as is visually implied by the 360-degree pan of the cell's walls which opens the film: the narrative space curves around the problematic relationship between Valentin and Molina.

Valentin is a hard-core leftist from an upper-class background, who ruled out pleasure from his life-style in the conviction that it would signify the persistence of his bourgeois origin. Pompous, dogmatic and cultivated, he has all the theoretical weapons to decode social and cultural production. Obsessed with explaining everything, he reduces all aspects of life to the ultimate reality of "the struggle." Hence his contemptuous attitude towards

commercial cinema; only when he is poisoned or needs distraction can he appreciate the “fucking Nazi movie” so passionately described by Molina.

Molina is a queen who, in spite of his being a victim of social prejudice, is not in the least interested in politics. Sensitive and melancholic, he dreams of eternal love with a heterosexual man, and has basically accepted his own lot as an oppressed individual. It is not that he is unaware of oppression, as testified by the comment a “sister” makes about “this hypocritical society.” He merely dreams his misery away, having decided, as William Hurt suggests, “to turn society’s judgment on him as trash by acting trashy—thereby showing them the worst part about themselves.”⁵ With respect to cinema, Molina is Valentin’s opposite, for he hates analyzing the films which he likes primarily for their capacity to create an openness to wonder and emotions.

The entire film focuses on the initial misunderstandings and growing solidarity between Molina and Valentin, the personal and the political. This single-minded concern with the representation of the imaginary ghetto where orthodox revolutionary politics meets with sexual oppression—a situation indeed symptomatic of the left’s recent past—is what makes *Kiss of the Spider Woman* a film about the left.

Kiss of the Spider Woman contains an engrossing portrayal of the most vilified type of homosexual: a queen. Undeniably, it is required of us by our culture to feel a sense of variously expressed unease at the sight of a transvestite, and the film masterfully plays with this. Helped by Hurt’s performance—stretched between caricature and tragic composure—Molina’s character gradually seduces the most homophobic thinkers and forces them to grant him dignity and respect. Moreover, by privileging Molina visually (close-ups) and audially (we hear his sighs of nostalgic rapture when he delivers the lines of his favorite film), Babenco endows Molina with a centrality that is likely to enhance the viewer’s positive response if not identification. The audience starts by laughing at Molina’s coquettish affectations, is ready to smile by the time he makes love to Valentin, and implodes with empathy when, after revealing a capacity

for love unsurpassed in the film, he goes off to meet his fate.

By endowing Molina with such a positive halo, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* makes him the locus of an attack against sexism. Convinced of being a woman, he displays conventionally “feminine” traits in a film that practically has no women (Leni and Marta are after all reflections of the men’s imaginations). Thus, Molina’s sensitivity and keen eye for people’s hearts succeed in drawing attention and sympathy to some aspects of “femininity” without playing with the desire of the heterosexual male viewer. Coming from somewhere astride sexual difference, Molina’s voice makes us heed the proposition that “if there were more people in the world acting like women there would be less torture.” However, this is a plea for the “feminine” side that is in all of us rather than a celebration of “natural” qualities. Just as Valentin learns how to appreciate Molina’s “femininity” and Molina himself slowly sheds his effeminate mannerisms while retaining his emotional charge, so, the film suggests, we all can move across the rigid line separating “masculine” and “feminine,” for they are socially codified economies of feelings and behavior.

Babenco’s film does not merely engage in the struggle against homophobic prejudice and sexism; it shows that they are rooted in Valentin’s mind as well. Indeed we cannot help being surprised and annoyed at his reiterated references to “acting like a man.” No sooner do we hear both the black cop and Valentin screaming “you fucking faggot” at Molina, than we realize that indeed something is wrong with the left Valentin represents. His machismo can in fact be traced back to conventional Marxism’s disregard for the personal, private sphere. In this respect, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* contains an indictment of leftist rigidity and therefore belongs to that group of works which mount on attack against revolutionary Reason and its unhealthy rigor. On a theoretical level, the author who comes to mind is of course Pasolini, the Marxist homosexual who lived in his own body the tensions between Valentin and Molina. In his article “What Is Neo-Zhdanovism And What Is Not,” not only did he condemn “the fascism of the Left” but actually prefigured and explained the clash between Babenco’s two out-

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casts.⁶ According to Pasolini, a homosexual violates social norms by his/her very physical presence, constituting a sort of “natural” transgression which “may or may not involve political consciousness.” On the other hand, the transgression of a political activist is often the result of intellectual choice and therefore is easy prey to “the moralistic extremism” which “becomes neo-Stalinist when reabsorbed by the old Communist culture.”

Like Pasolini’s, Babenco’s criticism of Valentin is the fruit of love rather than hate. For all his laughable and irritating stands (e.g., his refusal to indulge in the pleasure of eating an avocado), Valentin is not a negative figure; he has something to offer Molina (and us), as when he uncovers the wounds on his tortured body and asks: “Is this reality or phantasy?” Here *Kiss of the Spider Woman* seems to suggest that, yes, there is a reality one cannot ignore, but Valentin is so narrow-minded in his perceptions and goals that he fails to see Molina as yet another wound on reality’s body. In fact, Valentin needs Molina’s proximity to realize the redeeming value of dreams, love and emotions, all pleasures one can steal from “the system.” And to the extent that Babenco depicts Valentin’s negative posture only to subvert it, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* can be seen as a film about the need to incorporate “irrational” aspects in a struggle that seems to demand an exclusive

engagement of the mind. If dreams come as a compassionate morphine shot after torture, the escape they yield cannot be condemned. For the act of not suffering in a system that is bent upon your destruction is also subversive.

This leads us to another aspect of Babenco’s film which is relevant to cinema and the left. The Brazilian situation of leftist critics forming what director Diegues called “an ideological patrol,” has a correlative in the US, where a global pessimism *à la* Adorno is still rather fashionable in radical circles. In his “What Do Movies Do?” Douglas Kellner argues that “too many radical cultural critics engage in what might be called ‘kvetch-criticism,’ which primarily denounces mainstream film as a tool of dominant ideology, fails to see ideological conflict within film, or fails to appreciate what films reveal about their societies.” Undoubtedly, Valentin would be a “kvetch-critic,” ready to stand back from the emotional response produced by the film and to chastise any of its pleasures, first and foremost that of identification. Yet, he not only comes to enjoy Molina’s fervid description of a Nazi propaganda film but even draws strength from it. Subtly, the audience is made to see what Molina has seen and is therefore put in a position to appreciate the extent to which he has ignored the film’s political message and derived an incitement to keep dreaming about devotion and passion. The snippets of the

German superproduction telling the story of Leni Lamaïson and her blue-eyed Nazi officer make us laugh, but Molina takes them seriously and bends them to his own needs. To condemn his identification with the French singer and her sacrificial love amounts to leaving the mobilization of feelings to reactionary politics; for, as a rule, it is the right that appeals to the guts, the left being obsessed with rational distancing. Significantly, Molina participates in Valentin's struggle (whatever his motives) only after love has produced in him a sense of solidarity; his action is mediated by feelings not thought.

To be sure, all this does not redeem the Nazi film; it simply warns us against constructing the viewer's response in too rigid a fashion. We may infer that Babenco has indeed attempted to focus on issues of cinematic pleasure from his decision to have Molina narrate only the Nazi film among the five that he actually describes in Puig's novel. All five are mainstream productions telling stories of romantic passion obscured by dark forces. One of them even ends with the separation of two lovers because of the man's decision "to remain with the guerrillas," while "the woman goes back all alone to her job in Paris, and the parting is really sad, because the two of them actually love one another."⁸ Thus, Babenco has disregarded the possibility of making a collage of Molina's films as well as the opportunity to explore the two cellmates' contrast over the film in which leftist politics face love. Interestingly, there is a sense in which the Nazi film is privileged by the novel itself, for Puig inserts a long footnote quoting "the middle pages" of the imaginary "press-book from Tobis-Berlin Studios regarding the super-

production of *Her Real Glory*."⁹ In effect, the Nazi film does deserve a special place in that it should absolutely repel Molina: together with Jews and communists, homosexuals were people to be exterminated. If Molina's appreciation for this film ruthlessly exposes his political unawareness, it also suggests that an engrossing narrative is more than just its intentional ideological message: "I detest politics," Molina proclaims, "but I'm mad about the leading man." By concentrating on the Nazi film, Babenco's film argues its point by means of paradox: even a declaredly right-wing film contains footholds enabling an appropriation against the grain by a viewer determined to do so. In addition, the propaganda film reveals that Nazism too, like Valentin, legitimizes commitment with an appeal to the redemption of mankind. Yet, Valentin would argue, one needs to distinguish between different kinds of commitment and appeal: they are not all the same. Similarly, mainstream films cannot be lumped together as having a univocal impact on the audience.

By making a plea for a less rigid criticism, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* begs to be judged accordingly. With the exception of the initial 360-degree pan, Babenco's camera work hardly ever draws attention to itself; subservient to plot and characterization, the camera is there to inform. Given the restricted space of the cell, longer takes would have been possible, but Babenco has opted for frequent cuts, the conversational shot-reverse shot of classic cinema. Flashbacks, dreams, and inserts from the Nazi film all come rather predictably and in no way force the spectator to work hard at piecing the story together. In sum: *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is shot with a "transparent style" and is devoid of the experimentalism which characterizes Puig's novel. Yet, for all its complicity with the dominant forms of representation, it is a very effective political film that produces feelings of sympathy with oppression and indignation at unnecessary suffering. It is a film that addresses the left by adopting Molina's spider-stratagems—affection and pleasure—so as to induce key revisions in our ideas about political activity, sexuality and film theory/practice.

An examination of the film's relation to the novel constitutes yet another (more scholarly) point of entrance in the text that strength-

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Sonia Braga in the film-within-the-film



ens the argument above. In the first place, Babenco's very choice to adapt it for the screen is significant in and of itself. Puig is an author with a considerable interest in the cinema, which he studied with Zavattini at the *Centro Sperimentale* in Rome. Moreover, his adolescence in a small town was admittedly enlivened by Hollywood films, so that he certainly is in a position to appreciate the value of entertainment and dreams provided by celluloid heroes. This has prompted Pauline Kael to dismissively label Puig's novel "homage to escapism," which reveals her failure to appreciate the extent to which so-called escape can be good, indeed subversive, in certain situations.¹⁰

In fact, Puig's text is the site of a dialectical tension between passion and knowledge, sex and politics. The narrator's voice is absent from the story but enters the text by means of eight long footnotes providing a history of recent discourse on homosexuality—from the theories of "physical origin" through Freud and Marcuse to Millet and Taube. The "homage to escapism" represented by Molina is therefore countered by the intellectual passion of the footnotes. Furthermore Valentin's character is more positive in the novel than in the film, for the latter has chosen to highlight his rigidity without any hint of his suggestions' redemptive value. It is no accident that the reader is referred to the first of the footnotes when Valentin admits to his ignorance about homosexuality and expresses his desire to know more about it. It is as if Puig backed Valentin's will to define and investigate.

The first two footnotes, however, report the reactionary and popular views on homosexuality, thus suggesting that Valentin himself is not yet capable of understanding the full political implications of gays' "revolutionary nonconformity." Progressively, the footnotes lead us to regard homosexuality as a libidinal investment which patriarchal society must condemn and repress. As a result, a political framework is suggested as the most viable way to understand homosexuality. Thus, one finds a double, parallel movement in the novel: on the one hand, Valentin's narrow notion of struggle is slowly modified and enriched by his exposure to Molina's passion; on the other, male homosexuality is gradually portrayed as the choice that an

"extremely sensitive and precociously intelligent boy" makes in order "to reject the paternal model"—a model that is "violently authoritarian and masculine."¹¹ We can therefore say that the footnotes aim at weaving together the sexual and the political which are otherwise set in confrontational positions by the dialogic structure of the main text.

Puig's novel is multidimensional. Its several levels of discourse, the psychoanalytic language of the footnotes, the long sections of "inner speech" interrupting the dialogues, all make it a complex book. Such a complexity might disorientate a noninitiated reader but constitutes a treat for intellectuals, for it enables them derive "symbolic profit" from the display of their interpretive competence.¹² Babenco has simplified the novel's structure with an eye to popular taste and has therefore run the risk of disappointing all those who cherish the book for its complexity. It must be remembered, however, that the ultimate thrust of the novel aims at elucidating and politicizing a social reality called homosexuality. In this respect, we may define Puig's book as a text in which a modernist structure serves a realist purpose. Hence, I think that Babenco has not betrayed the novel but has courageously and successfully attempted to popularize and thus make more effective its political dimension. The simplified form makes sure that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* will reach and please not only the Valentins (hardcore intellectuals) but also the Molinas. The film's form matches and reinforces the content which, as we have seen, prescribes that all the Valentins come down to earth.

On the level of the plot, there are three major differences between the film and the novel.

(1) None of the five films Molina recounts in the novel is about the spider woman: it is Valentin who refers to the kiss Molina asks of him before leaving the cell as to the kiss of the spider woman. Later, in his final drugged phantasy, Valentin will dream of "the woman in the deepest part of the jungle" trapped by "the spider web that is growing out of her body."¹³ The film makes the spider woman a product of Molina's film-telling and establishes a connection between her, Leni and Marta (Valentin's bourgeois girlfriend), by having Sonia Braga play the three of them.

Thus, by unifying around Molina that world of feelings and dreams to which Valentin is opposed, Babenco's film highlights the contrast between the two.

(2) In the novel the warden is always alone, whereas in the film we see him with the black police officer who is the toughest on Molina. Interestingly, the warden of the film is in a wheel chair and thus seems at the mercy of his black colleague. This may be an ingenious attempt to incorporate in the film a suggestive detail of a movie Molina recounts in the novel, in which a black witch doctor betrays his people by joining and helping the white usurper exploit the natives.

(3) Whereas in the novel Valentin is arrested for inciting factory workers to strike, Babenco shows his capture after he gave his passport to Americo, the old-time revolutionary we repeatedly see taken back to his cell bleeding. Americo, a complete invention of the film, is portrayed as someone who tries to escape but fails, as someone whose struggle is right but whose rigid adherence to old models is detrimental. It is no accident that Valentin confesses of no longer believing in violence while describing his own encounter with Americo to Molina. As a figure of Valentin's past, as a father figure of the left, Americo—or the America that struggles—is the left frozen in its post-sixties stupor, the left that Babenco/Molina's kiss wants to awaken.

—MAURICIO VIANO

NOTES

1. "Bye Bye Boredom: Brazilian Cinema Is Coming of Age" is the title of a very useful article by Mark Osiel in *Cineaste*, vol. XIV, n. 1, 1985, pp. 30–35. My assessment of the present situation of Brazilian cinematography is largely indebted to it as well as to the last issue of *Framework*, n. 28, entirely dedicated to Post Cinema Novo. On the subject, see also the introduction to Randall Johnson, *Cinema Novo X Five* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).

2. In *Framework*, p. 8, Jean Claude Bernadet describes "legal space" as "the space defined by market conditions and the state's procedures" within which "the film maker, like any other intellectual, tends to act."

3. *Osiel*, p. 35.

4. Manuel Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. (New York: Knopf, 1979). Needless to say the effect is mutual, for the sales of Puig's book have considerably increased since the film appeared.

5. "William Hurt interviewed by Dan Yakir," *Film Comment*, vol. 21, n. 4, July–Aug. 1985.

6. Translated in *October*, n. 13, Summer 1980, pp. 7–10.

7. Kellner's piece is actually a review of Peter Biskind's *Seeing Is Believing* in *Socialist Review*, n. 82/83, 1985, pp. 175–84.

8. *Puig*, p. 122.

9. *Puig*, p. 82.

10. *New Yorker*, Aug. 26, 1985.

11. *Puig*, p. 209.

12. In his book *Distinction* (tr. by Richard Nice, Cambridge: Harvard, 1984), Pierre Bourdieu convincingly shows that the consumption of art is a distinctive practice, for it grants a symbolic profit which is directly proportional to the difficulty of the work that is consumed: "The symbolic profit arising from material or symbolic appropriation of a work of art is measured by the distinctive value which the work derives from the rarity of the disposition and competence which it demands and which determines its class distribution." (p. 229) Thus, "the objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which clearly attest the quality of the appropriation and therefore the quality of their owner. . . . This explains the importance which the pursuit of distinction attaches to all those activities which, like artistic consumption, demand pure, pointless expenditure, especially of the rarest and most precious thing of all, namely time, time devoted to consumption or time devoted to the cultural acquisition which adequate consumption presupposes." (p. 281)

BROADWAY DANNY ROSE

Script and direction: Woody Allen. Photography: Gordon Willis. Music: Dick Hyman. Orion.

Woody Allen's early comedies, from *Take the Money and Run* to *Love and Death*, were praised by most critics for their humor and steadily increasing cinematic skill. Admirers of his later films tend to fall into two groups—those who love the romantic films set in contemporary Manhattan (*Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*), and those, mainly academic critics, who prefer the "self-reflexive" films about the film-maker, film-making, or the film spectator (*Stardust Memories*, *Zelig*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*).*

Broadway Danny Rose was reviled by some critics when it appeared and, at best, mildly praised by others. That it was not particularly self-reflexive may have disappointed some, that it was not another *Annie Hall* or *Man-*

*Deconstructionist criticism has shown that any text can be read by virtue of those traces of its own generation that any text provides. Self-reflexivity in the usual senses may actually work to conceal a text's operation. Many contemporary critics have blurred this distinction by asserting self-reflexivity not just as a